

Kairos: Appeals to Timeliness

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“This is the right time, and this is the right thing.” – Sir Thomas Moore

“Kairos” is an ancient rhetorical concept that has gained importance in different disciplines over the centuries. So what is it? Kairos is knowing what is most appropriate in a given situation; for our purposes, let’s think of it as saying (or writing) the right thing at the right time. Appeals to kairos in written form try to make use of the particular moment—attempting to capture in words what will be immediately applicable, appropriate, and engaging for a particular audience. Kairos is timeliness, appropriateness, decorum, symmetry, balance—awareness of the rhetorical situation or “the circumstances that open moments of opportunity” (Kinneavy; Sipiora; Vatz; Bitzer; Hill 217). Kairos is crafting serendipity, like when the sun comes out at the end of a romantic comedy after all the conflicts have been resolved.

In Greek, both *kairos* and *chronos* literally mean “time,” but *kairos* does not mean “time” in the same sense as used in contemporary English. In Greek, *kairos* represents a kind of “qualitative” time, as in “the right time”; *chronos* represents a different kind of “quantitative” time, as in, “What time is it?” and “Will we have enough time?” (Kinneavy; Stephenson). Kairos means taking advantage of or even creating a perfect moment to deliver a particular message.

Consider, for example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The speech was rhetorically powerful: it changed minds, persuaded people to support the civil rights movement, and served as a powerful rallying cry for a generation of reformers. But the speech was so powerful in part because of its kairotic moment: the timing and atmosphere of the speech lent themselves to powerful oratory. Together, the “where” (the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.), the “why” (the culmination of a march on Washington by thousands of members of the civil rights movement), and the “when” (during the centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, at a time of day when broadcast networks could carry the speech live, and during a march which had drawn more than 250,000 people to the capital) created the perfect moment for King’s message to reach the largest number of receptive listeners.

Although *kairos* has long been a key word for many disciplines, within the study of writing, *kairos* has been the topic of much debate in the last few decades. James Kinneavy is largely credited with reintroducing the importance of *kairos* into the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition and, thus, the composition classroom. According to Kinneavy, *kairos* is “the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved” (84). Other scholars suggest that “*kairos* refers to a struggle, at the point of rhetorical intervention, between situational factors” (Sheridan, Michel, and Ridolfo). Both definitions get at the elusive, jaguar-in-the-jungle nature of *kairos*. Kairos is so hard to pin down because, as Phillip Sipiora suggests, it is “a *dynamic* principle rather than a static, codified rhetorical technique” (10). So, the rhetor must be “accomodative,” waiting for the right time, matching her text to the precise moment in order to be most successful (Sipiora). It’s sort of the Goldilocks rule of writing: you don’t want your message to be too big, too small, too soft, or too hard; it should be just right.

So far, *kairos* seems pretty slippery, a sort of “I’ll know it when I see it” kind of principle. In some ways, *kairos* represents the ephemeral, “fleeting” nature of “the right time.” In terms of writing, we try to capture the moment of balance, the kairotic moment, and thus move the audience by appealing to that specific context.

Because kairos is so tied to the particular moment, or rhetorical situation, it is hard to provide concrete examples out of context. But a good way to think about kairos is to consider how rhetors try to persuade audiences based on unique timing and current events. For instance, consider the way restaurants, bookstores, and various campus entities appeal to incoming freshman students. Vendors have signs declaring “New to USF? Join this club to meet new people and learn about the campus!” and “First-year students, this week only: \$100 off your first month at this apartment building!” They reference the particular moment, first stepping onto a new campus, to persuade you to do everything from opening a new bank account and buying logo bumper stickers to ordering a dozen pizzas. Effective uses of kairos take advantage of the particular time and place to make texts unique and give them a sense of immediacy.

Kairos is undoubtedly a pretty heady term, something ancient philosophers, modern rhetoricians, and contemporary composition students have wrestled with. But it’s worth wrestling with. For your own writing, you can skillfully employ kairos by doing the following:

- Examine the rhetorical situation, the factors that create that particular moment.
- Consider the order and timing of your text.
- Be accomodative; appeal to each specific context.

By using kairos as a guiding principle for your own texts, you can bring interest and timeliness to your writing projects. So when you begin to write, think of the moment that your writing will enter into—the audience that will read it, the conversation that it joins, the history surrounding the topic, and the words you use to craft your argument. Awareness and use of this knowledge create beautiful writing that, like turning the key in your door at the end of a long day, seems perfectly timed, effortless, and just right.

Identifying Kairos

By now, you should know what kairos is: an attempt to persuade through appeals to timeliness. Here are a few possible examples of kairos:

- **Calls to “Act Now!”** An appeal to some particular fast-approaching moment is often a rhetor’s attempt to create a perfect kairotic moment for his or her message by creating a sense of urgency. You’ve likely seen a commercial or infomercial that pleads with the viewer to “Call now!” to receive some important prize or to avoid missing some sort of opportunity; this type of commercial or informercial employs kairos.
- **The use of deadlines or goals.** Such appeals to kairos are often seen as part of fundraising literature: by connecting a reader’s or listener’s response to a particular deadline or goal, the writer creates urgency and excitement.
- **References to “current crises” or impending doom.** Such references are prevalent in political and social campaigns. Consider, for example, the large number of financial bills, laws, and investigations undertaken by legislative bodies throughout the country after the most recent economic recession. Lawmakers were responding to and taking advantage of the kairotic moment created by the crisis in order to persuade their fellow lawmakers and constituents to support a particular fiscal policy.

Fallacious Kairos

- **Red Herring:** Introducing irrelevant facts or claims to detract from the actual argument. For instance, our invasion of Iraq was predicated, in part, upon the connection between the attacks of 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. The war was described by some as an appropriate response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, but in reality, the connection between Iraq and Saddam Hussein was a red herring. Hussein was not connected to Al Qaeda, the terrorist network that perpetrated the attacks, or 9/11.

- **Argument from Authority:** We already noted that an argument from false authority involves a speaker or writer claiming authority in a particular area without giving evidence of that authority. These claims of authority are obviously connected to ethos, but depending on the argument, may also be connected to kairos. For example, when a political candidate claims that, if action is not taken right now, the nation risks ruin, he or she is identifying him- or herself as an expert on both the nature of the problem as well as the timing.

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